

My colleagues and I have also consulted with Armed Services Committee Chairman BOB STUMP and Ranking Democratic Member IKE SKELTON to make certain time-sensitive technical amendments to certain servicemembers' and veterans' education provisions in current law.

Mr. Speaker, veterans' benefits and services indeed are "earned opportunities." They are earned through selfless and often hazardous service to our nation, during war and peace alike. Doing right by America's sons and daughters who have worn the military uniform is firmly ingrained in our national values, our national pride, and our sense of moral responsibility. On behalf of my fellow original cosponsors, I would like to highlight just a few of the 17 provisions in the bill.

Sadly, our nation loses about 1,500 World War II veterans each week. The Department of Veterans Affairs projects that the current death rate for our veterans will continue to increase, peaking in 2008. Our bill would increase the burial and funeral expenses for veterans whose death is service-connected from \$1,500 to \$2,000; increase burial and funeral expenses for veterans with nonservice-connected disabilities from \$300 to \$500; and increase the burial plot allowance from \$150 to \$300. The amount payable for these benefits has remained constant for many years in spite of inflation. The purchasing power associated with these provisions still is limited and I consider these provisions as a starting point for further improvements. I note that VA continues to maintain some 119 veterans cemeteries and 26 States participate in VA's State Cemetery Grants program. Both of these programs provide a final resting place for our veterans, and are separate and independent from the burial benefits in this bill.

Mr. Speaker, VA provides certain severely disabled veterans with grants for the purchase of automobiles or other conveyances. The grant also provides for adaptive equipment necessary for safe operation of these vehicles. Our bill would increase the amount of assistance for automobile and adaptive equipment for severely disabled veterans from \$8,000, which Congress established in October 1998, to \$9,000. Veterans eligible for the automobile allowance are among the most seriously disabled. I have a deep respect for them. Prior to the 1998 increase, Congress had not adjusted the grant since 1988. We need to ensure that seriously disabled veterans have the opportunity to participate in the everyday freedoms sustained by their service. We owe them nothing less and they ask for nothing more.

VA provides a one-time specially adapted housing grant of up to \$43,000 to veterans with service-connected disabilities consisting of certain combinations of loss or loss of use of extremities and blindness or other organic diseases or injuries. Veterans with service-connected blindness alone or with loss or loss of use of both upper extremities may receive a home adaption grant of up to \$8,250. Our bill would increase the amount of assistance for specially adapted housing grants for severely disabled veterans from \$43,000 to \$48,000 and the amount for additional adaptations that may be necessary later in the life of the dwelling from \$8,250 to \$9,250. I urge my colleagues to support these increases because, unless the amounts of the grants are periodically adjusted, inflation erodes their value and effectiveness.

Whenever we have the opportunity to make our policies family-friendly for Americans who wear the military uniform, I think we should do so. Our bill would extend coverage under the Servicemembers Group Life Insurance program to dependent spouses and children. The amount of coverage for a spouse would not exceed \$100,000 and the amount of coverage for each child would be \$10,000. The servicemember would not pay premiums on the child's coverage.

Mr. Speaker, I applaud my colleagues LANE EVANS and JERRY MORAN for their efforts on our provision that would revise the rules with respect to the net worth limitation for VA's means-tested pension program. Under our bill, the value of real property owned by the veteran and the veteran's spouse and children would be excluded if such property is used for farming, ranching, or similar agricultural purposes. I believe this provision is a fairer approach to the family farmer who becomes disabled from nonservice connected causes. Further, it would simplify administration of this program.

I appreciate Representatives PASCRELL and DOYLE's work on our next provisions, which would expand the definition of "eligible dependent" for purposes of VA outreach services to mean a spouse, surviving spouse, child, or dependent parent. The bill would require VA to make known through a variety of means such as the Internet, media outlets, and veterans' publications the VA services available, and require VA to provide to the veteran or dependent information concerning benefits and health care services whenever the veteran or dependent first applies for any benefit. My colleagues and I appreciate VA Under Secretary for Benefits Joe Thompson making Ms. Diane Fuller and Mr. Dennis Rhodes available to assist us in drafting this legislation.

Mr. Speaker, the fundamental marker of a successful transition for our servicemembers is timely and suitable employment. The Departments of Labor, Veterans Affairs and Defense operate a Transition Assistance Program, known as "TAP" for this and other transition purposes. In its 1999 report to the Veterans' Affairs and Armed Services Committees of the House and the Senate, the bipartisan Congressional Commission on Service members and Transition Assistance made a number of recommendations to improve servicemembers' transition programs and services. The Commission reported that the Department of Defense expects to separate about 238,000 servicemembers annually for the foreseeable future and that during the 10-year period from 1987 to 1997, total unemployment compensation to former servicemembers surpassed \$2.9 billion. The Commission also reported that compared with other veterans, Department of Labor Transition Assistance Program participants collected Unemployment Insurance for Ex-Service Members benefits for shorter periods because they found jobs more quickly. About 65 percent of servicemembers are married at the time of transition and many have children.

The issue our bill addresses is one of the timing of the Transition Assistance Program. Although section 1142 of title 10, United States Code, requires the Services to furnish transition assistance no later than 90 days before an individual's separation or retirement, the law does not specify the earliest point at

which this service should begin. Transition Assistance Program statistics reveal that the majority of servicemembers are within this three-month window when they first visit a transition office.

The Commission reported that during its visit with servicemembers at military installations in the Continental United States and around the world, servicemembers repeatedly voiced their desire to begin the transition process earlier than 90 days prior to separation—ideally one-year prior for regular separatees and two years prior for retirees. The Commission agreed that this approach gives servicemembers more adequate time to prepare. The Commission's Vice Chairman, G. Kim Wincup, former staff director of the House Armed Services Committee, an Assistant Secretary of the Army during the Persian Gulf War, was the Commission's chief advisor on transition matters. We note the Commission's observation in its report that: "additionally, it provides commanders flexibility since many servicemembers are deployed during the last six months of their active duty. With additional time, servicemembers could learn the fundamentals of transition and the job search process before deployment and relieve the pressure to compress transition and out processing into the last few weeks."

This provision in our bill would expand the availability of pre-separation counseling (and Transition Assistance Program assistance for servicemembers) as furnished by the Departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Labor to as early as nine months for separatees and 18 months for retirees, but in no event less than 90 days. TAP is so important because often it is the last thing servicemembers remember about their military service and it is what they share with the next generation.

Mr. Speaker, dramatic changes have occurred in both the methods for providing education and in the institutions offering courses over the past several years. As the Transition Commission pointed out, "postsecondary education is now available on the Internet, through broadcast media and videotape on satellite campuses, and through non-campus programs." Our bill would permit veterans to use VA educational assistance benefits for an independent study certificate program offered by an institution of higher learning. I thank the University of Phoenix, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, DeAnza Community College, Washington State University and George Washington University for bringing this issue to the Committee's attention.

I strongly urge my colleagues to support this legislation.

INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL RULING ON RAPE

HON. JANICE D. SCHAKOWSKY

OF ILLINOIS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, February 28, 2001

Ms. SCHAKOWSKY. Mr. Speaker, I was pleased to hear about the International Criminal Tribunal's conviction of the three Bosnian Serbs for rape, torture, and sexual enslavement of Muslim women during the Bosnian war. I submit into the RECORD the following Washington Post article that appeared on February 23, 2001, which details the outcome of